

# Critical Proximity

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## *Critical Proximity*

### Abstract:

This article explores the relationship between critical distance and the idea of proximity. In times that are often described as “global”, “24/7”, “connected”, “networked” and “immersive”, distance seems ever reduced and proximity omnipresent. The contemporary impression of ubiquitous proximity might constitute a threat to the survival of critical distance understood either as a cornerstone of enlightened and humanist critical practice or as a key metaphysical “technology”. The resulting “crisis of critical distance” produces the question of how to position oneself with regard to the “other” in a time that lacks distance and privileges proximity? In tracking the ambiguity (or the “aporia”) that surrounds proximity – the desire to be near and the need to maintain a distance – this article rereads some key Heideggerian and Derridean texts in order to attempt a deconstruction of the opposition of distance and proximity at work in the “metaphysics of presence”.

### Keywords:

aporia  
Cixous  
deconstruction  
Derrida  
distance  
Heidegger  
metaphysics  
proximity  
uncanny, the

...proximity loves me, this is what I say to myself, she still loves me since she is speaking to me. She is not here but there, she is speaking to me, she brings me near to myself who am so far from everything. She touches me, she takes me in her voice, while accusing me she cradles me again, she makes me swim, she engulfs me, you becloud me like a fish, I let myself be loved in the water. (Derrida 1987: 56)

I understood that it was you. You have always been “my” metaphysics, the metaphysics of my life, the “verso” of everything I write (my desire, speech, presence, proximity, law, my heart and soul, everything that I love and that you know before me)... (197)

This is typical, isn't it? You give someone a brief to tackle “critical distance”, and they'll do the exact opposite, and instead talk about proximity. Their critical reflexes will tell them that, first, they've got to establish, precisely, a critical distance from critical distance, before they can start talking about critical distance. So, quite “naturally”, proximity imposes itself.

This has nothing to do with flippancy, for who can afford to let go of critical distance in times that are described as “global”, “24/7”, “connected”, “networked” and “immersive”? In fact, in all the ambient and ubiquitous

contemporary impression of proximity, it might be the very survival of critical distance both as a critical practice and as a reflex that is at stake. What effects does this have on critical distance, as one of the cornerstones of enlightened and humanist critical practice? What do networked “posthumans” or, at least, new and social media-savvy “posthumanists”, in the time of connectedness and ubiquitous virtual presence, make of critical distance?<sup>1</sup>

As far as “critical” and “distance” are concerned, this seems to be their double bind: it is indeed very difficult to disagree with the idea and the need for critical distance – “for judgment or criticism to take place, a certain decisive distance is required”, as the call for papers makes clear. And, it seems equally difficult to ignore the “crisis of critical distance”, or maybe critical distance “as” crisis, especially so in the mentioned 24/7 global network society, characterized by the constant acceleration of technological change, new media connectivity, ubiquitous computing, hypercapitalist consumption and real-time financial transactions, wars and crises. It thus appears that critical distance as a necessary “tool” to gauge our relationship to the world and to our (human and nonhuman) others, in short, our notion of subjectivity, is being put to a severe test.

The idea of the crisis of critical distance has a long history of course. In *Blindness and Insight* Paul de Man started his evaluation of what was then “contemporary criticism” with an updated version of his 1967 article “Criticism and Crisis”, by drawing an analogy between Stéphane Mallarmé’s “news” about the state of French poetry – “*on a touché au vers*” [they have tampered with the (rules of) verse] – and the contemporary “crisis” in “Continental criticism” (*on a touché à la critique*) (De Man 1983: 3). The fallout of this crisis, which one could give a name, namely that of “the advent of theory” (“this sudden expansion of literary studies outside their own province and into the realm of the social sciences...” (5)), and which corresponds to the breaking away from a mould and to entering into a new “constellation”, is still very much “here”, despite many reports that we, today, are supposedly living in so-called “post-theoretical” times. De Man characterizes this “turn” within criticism as one of “necessary” self-reflection or scrutiny that “defines, in effect, the act of criticism itself”. Crisis and criticism, for de Man, have always been inextricably linked:

...all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis. To speak of a crisis of criticism is, then, to some degree redundant. In periods that are not periods of crisis... there can be all kinds of approaches to literature: historical, philological, psychological, etc., but there can be no criticism. For such periods... will never put the act of writing into question by relating it to its specific intent. The Continental criticism of today is doing just that, and it therefore deserves to be called genuine literary criticism. It will become clear, I hope, that this is not to be considered as an evaluative but as a purely descriptive statement. (de Man 1983: 8).

Two things need to be said about this statement as seen from today’s perspective: first, criticism has to a certain extent moved “away”, maybe even “beyond” the “literary” and has instead been moving towards “writing” and all

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive definition and analysis of the notions of “posthuman”, “posthumanist” and “posthumanism” please see Herbrechter 2013a.

forms and practices of inscription in general; second, if de Man was right, then crisis between or within criticism must be understood as a crisis of “geography” or space, namely of the difference between proximity and distance, or, one could say, between critical distance or critical proximity. In fact, one could call it a crisis of “self-approximation”: there is never enough distance and never enough proximity in criticism and that exactly is its crisis, but this circumstance is precisely that which makes it critical “in the first place”. The “crisis of critical distance” is therefore constitutional, aporetic, necessary; it cannot be avoided and must therefore be engaged, and engaged critically of course. And thus the crisis perpetuates and legitimates itself.

Our question – the question of the crisis of critical distance – thus becomes: what to do with this aporia at the heart of critical distance? What to do with critical distance – safe-guard, re-establish, or “deconstruct” it and if so, how? Through accelerated, intensified or somehow increased critical distance, or through (strategic) critical “indifference”? What would the opposite to and the absence of critical distance be, in criticism or thinking in general? This is what motivates my return to the question of vicinity, proximity, or nearness in the light of the conundrum of what one might call, following Barbara Johnson, “critical difference”, by re-reading some aspects of the logic of critical approximation in theory or critical thinking. As Barbara Johnson points out: “The difference between *difference* and *critical*... is not as clear and distinct as we might have been tempted to think” (Johnson 1988: ix). The “problem of difference”, which is precisely “our” problem of critical distance and critical proximity at hand, right “here” and right “now”:

...can thus be seen both as an uncertainty over separability and as a drifting apart within identity. And the very fact that it is impossible to know whether something constitutes description or disagreement, information or censure, is perhaps ultimately the most problematic and critical difference of all. For it is precisely in the nature of difference that it consists in the engendering of uncertainty not only over its nature but also over the danger or usefulness of its very propagation. (x)

For Johnson, who is zooming in on the notion of Derridean “*différance*”, it is of course this uncertainty, desire and uncontrollability of difference that is at work in (literary) theory, criticism and, arguably, in critical distance in general:

Far from eliminating binary oppositions from the critical vocabulary, one can only show that binary difference does not function as one thinks it does and that certain subversions that seem to befall it in the critical narrative are logically prior to it and necessary in its very constructions. Difference is a form of *work* to the extent that it *plays* beyond the control of any subject: it is, in fact, that without which no subject could ever be constituted. (xi)

The opposition and hence the difference between (critical) distance and (critical) proximity does therefore not form a dialectic but a “play of differences” within a work, maybe even a “network” of “relays”, deferrals and disseminations.

As far as the notion of proximity in theory and criticism is concerned, this was the focus of a special issue of *Postmodern Culture* in 2005. In the Preface, Rei

Terada points out that “Contemporary theory has been nervous about proximity. In the 1980s and early 1990s, critical theory and cultural studies often repeated that one should not identify too closely with the other” (Terada 2005: n.p.). Proximity, however, is a “testing ground for struggles between politics and ethics” since “[p]roximity, the afterlife of approach, also retains the trace of time in spatial relations; no consciousness of proximity exists without at least a hypothesis of how one came to be near, whether one arrived before or after the other” (*ibid.*). Terada’s critique is aimed at the “ethics of proximity”, which, following Levinas, is seen as “traumatic”:<sup>2</sup>

Even as the stricture on identification remains largely in place, current schematizations of proximity often underestimate the difficulty of bearing with others, or masochistically embrace it. Contemporary ethics in the lineage of Levinas figures the other as an overpowering given that makes asymmetrical, ultimate demands; the subject endorses the pain of invasion as the very condition of subjectivity. (Terada 2005)

In the face of the “frictive presence of proximate others” (*ibid.*) there is the necessity of “working through [the] resistance to proximity” (*ibid.*). Following on from this problematic of proximity in the (human) “face-to-face” ethics in Levinas, Judith Butler, in her recent work, has hinted at a complication of ethical obligations “that emerge both at a distance and within relations of proximity” (Butler 2012: 134) within the above-mentioned context of globalization and the effects of new and social media:

...if I am only bound to those who are close to me, already familiar, then my ethics is invariably parochial, communitarian, and exclusionary. If I am only bound to those who are “human” in the abstract, then I avert every effort to translate culturally between my own situation and that of others. If I am only bound to those who suffer at a distance, but never those who are close to me, then I evacuate my situation in an effort to secure the distance that allows me to entertain ethical feeling and even feel myself to be ethical. But ethical relations are mediated – and I use that word deliberately here, invoking a reading of Hegel in the midst of the digital age. (138)

This could be read as a critique of (too much) critical distance. Instead of a “territorialized” ethics based on a geographical notion of proximity Butler uses Levinas to stress that “the life of the other, the life that is *not* our own, is also our life, since whatever ‘our’ life has is derived precisely from this sociality, this being already, and from the start, dependent on a world of others, constituted in and by a social world” (140-1). Butler, in turn, refers to Arendt to anchor such a

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<sup>2</sup> The question of proximity as a central theme in Levinas’s work has been the focus of both Libertson (1982) and Smith (2005). As Simon Critchley explains: “The entire phenomenological thrust of *Otherwise than Being* is to ‘ground’ ethical subjectivity in sensibility and to describe sensibility as proximity to the Other, a proximity whose basis is found in substitution” (Critchley 1992: 179).

“glocal” ethics to the notion of “cohabitation” without prerogative (“no one has the prerogative to choose with whom to cohabit the earth”, 143). She thus wishes to add an “ecological supplement to Arendt’s anthropocentrism” (144), and this irrepressible ecological “supplement”, for Butler, is the body in its shared “precarity”:

In my view, some ethical claims emerge from bodily life and perhaps all ethical claims presuppose a human life, understood as injurable, one that is not restrictively human. After all, the life that is worth preserving and safeguarding, who should be protected from murder (Levinas) and genocide (Arendt), is connected to, and dependent upon, nonhuman life in essential ways; this follows from the idea of the human animal, as Derrida has articulated it, which becomes a different point of departure for thinking about politics. (147)

Apart from the Levinasian notion of proximity, of the “*prochain*” (however not as a rehabilitation of “humanism” and anthropocentrism, but rather as founded on a shared bodily experience of “precarity” (148)), what is most important for the purpose of my argument here is what Butler says about the role of the media in constructing a politics that would be “committed to fostering a sustainable interdependency on egalitarian terms” (149). She argues that “the kinds of ethical demands that emerge through the media in these times depend on this reversibility of proximity and distance. Indeed I want to suggest that *certain bonds are actually wrought through this very reversibility, however incomplete it is*” (149).

Arguably, then, this “reversibility” of “proximity and distance”, fostered by the media, and especially, global, new and social media, would need to be recontextualised and reread through what one might call the “critique” or even “deconstruction” of proximity and distance. One therefore has to look towards the work of Jacques Derrida, which through its sustained engagement with Levinas, Heidegger, Blanchot, and also Cixous, foregrounds the mentioned aporia of necessary *and* impossible proximity and distance. The main assumption and presupposition in this context is that this impossible proximity (or distance) – a proximity that is at once too close (for critical distance) and never close enough (for something like “critical proximity”) is what underlies “Western metaphysics” with its “phono-logo-centrism”, as Derridean deconstruction has demonstrated. I would claim that the impossibility and necessity of proximity has indeed been one of the main targets of Derridean deconstruction from its very beginnings and that it continues to concerns “us”, “here” and “now”.

From the beginning, so to speak, one of the major moves in Derrida’s work has been, what one could call, the “deconstruction of proximity”. If one were biographically minded one could even point out that Derrida, in *Monolinguisme de l’autre*, refers to the “singulière et trouble proximité” (Derrida 1996: 71), which characterizes his relationship to French, but which could also be seen as the general state of “originary displacement” from one’s self and the resulting auto-affective and auto-immunitarian effects this inevitably has for any subject (I will return to this point towards the end of this essay). The “of” in the phrase “deconstruction of proximity”, as usual, is to be understood both as an objective and subjective genitive, i.e. the “task” is to deconstruct a certain notion

of proximity, but, at the same time, it is the radical and uncontrollable notion of proximity that does the deconstruction or, deconstructs “itself”, so to speak.

The first and foremost of these (self)deconstructing proximities would thus be closely linked to the idea of identity, propriety, familiarity and, most importantly, presence. This proximity is the proximity of “auto-affection”, as Geoffrey Bennington explains in a short piece entitled “Auto-”. There is no auto-affection, no sense of self, or of being at-one-with-oneself and self-presence (proximity to one’s self) without hetero-affection, i.e. without (critical) distance: “Je m’affecte – toujours de l’autre” (Bennington 2007: 481), which calls into existence and provokes, at the same time, the principle of “auto-immunity”. This line of reasoning is what is at stake in Derrida’s work implicitly from the beginning, but it can be seen most prominently in his work on autobiography (with its beginnings in *The Post Card*, via *Monolingualism of the Other*, and, most recently in his texts on the question of the animal, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, where he speaks of this “intolerable proximity” of the animal as “wholly other” as well as a fellow creature (Derrida 2002: 381)).

However, the proximity “trouble”, is also there from the beginning, in Derrida’s early work, and is an essential part of the critique of phono-logo-centrism in Western metaphysics (of presence), which is countered by Derrida with the notions of “différance” and “(arch-)writing”, “supplementarity, and “iterability”. One could find numerous passages in Derrida to show this critique of proximity at work. A few examples will have to suffice as a starting point here and now. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida explains Saussure’s implication with “phonocentrism”, namely his privileging of voice over writing, by attributing greater proximity (and therefore greater truth and “immediacy”) to the “mental signified” over the material “signified”. Saussure’s notion of the sign (constituted by the two sides of a leaf: signifier and signified) “remains therefore within the heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning” (Derrida 1997: 12-13). The impression of this proximity is based on the phonocentric illusion of the “*s’entendre-parler*”, to hear oneself speak, which is also the basis for the metaphysical “auto-affection” of the subject, mentioned above, or “the strange privilege of sound in idealization, the production of the concept and the self-presence of the subject” (13), “hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak – an indissociable system – the subject affects itself and is related to itself in the element of ideality” (13). This “self-proximity” becomes the guarantor of presence, existence, truth, propriety, and is thus the designated target of deconstruction, as Derrida explains in *Of Grammatology*:

To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words “proximity,” “immediacy,” “presence” (the proximate [*proche*], the own [*propre*], and the pre- of presence), is my final intention in this book. This deconstruction of presence accomplishes itself through the deconstruction of consciousness, and therefore through the irreducible notion of the trace (*Spur*), as it appears in both Nietzschean and Freudian discourse. And finally, in all scientific fields, notably in biology, this notion seems currently to be dominant and irreducible. (Derrida 1997: 71)

The necessary immediacy of self-presence on which auto-affection with its (auto)immunitarian mechanisms relies, depends on a necessary movement of (self-)appropriation understood as “approximation” – being close, and ideally, at one, with one’s self. This phantasm of oneness, however, cannot and also must never be achieved because in erasing difference and the other, absolute proximity as identity would be equivalent to “death” and “silence”; and, this is where the particular relevance to our topic at hand, right here and right now, lies, because it would also necessarily lead to the erasure of critical distance as a precondition for consciousness.

Later in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida also associates this critique of proximity, via Rousseau, with the idea of “man” and “humanism” in general and links it to his well-known deconstructive topos of the “logic of supplementarity”:

Thus supplementarity makes possible all that constitutes the property of man: speech, society, passion, etc. But what is this property [*propre*] of man? On the one hand, it is that of which the possibility must be thought before man, and outside of him. Man allows himself to be announced to himself after the fact of supplementarity, which is thus not an attribute—accidental or essential—of man. For on the other hand, supplementarity, which is *nothing*, neither a presence nor an absence, is neither a substance nor an essence of man. It is precisely the play of presence and absence, the opening of this play that no metaphysical or ontological concept can comprehend. Therefore this property [*propre*] of man is not a property of man: it is the very dislocation of the proper in general: it is the dislocation of the characteristic, the proper in general, the impossibility—and therefore the desire—of **self-proximity**; the impossibility and therefore the desire of pure presence. That supplementarity is not a characteristic or property of man does not mean only, and in an equally radical manner, that it is not a characteristic or property; but also that its play precedes what one calls man and extends outside of him. Man *calls himself* man only by drawing limits excluding his other from the play of supplementarity: the purity of nature, of animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity. The approach to these limits is at once feared as a threat of death, and desired as access to a life without difference. The history of man *calling himself* man is the articulation of *all* these limits among themselves. All concepts determining a non-supplementarity (nature, animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity, etc.) have evidently no truth-value. They belong—moreover, with the idea of truth itself—to an epoch of supplementarity. They have meaning only within a closure of the game. (Derrida 1997: 245-46; added bold type)

This powerful and in many ways devastating paragraph has obvious implications for the idea of critical distance and its crucial role of any metaphysical and especially humanistic or anthropocentric idea of self-identity. The critique of the anthropocentric aspect is taken up again in “The Ends of Man” (Derrida 1982: 109-36) and has in recent times led to a movement that has been referred to as “critical posthumansim” (for a survey see Herbrechter 2013).

Again, in “The Ends of Man”, Derrida reads Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* specifically through the notion of impossible “proximity” as outlined



above. Heidegger's rejection or *Destruktion* of humanism, for Derrida, does not go far enough in challenging the residual anthropocentrism of Western metaphysics of being or *Dasein*, precisely because it still relies on the idea of a human essence anchored in a process of self-approximation:

At least this is what I would like to suggest, and I will regroup the effects or indices of this magnetic attraction beneath the general concept of *proximity*. It is in the play of a certain proximity, proximity to oneself and proximity to Being that we will see constituted, against metaphysical humanism and anthropologism, another insistence of man, one which relays, relieves, supplements that which it destroys, along pathways on which we are, from which we have hardly emerged – perhaps – and which remain to be examined .

What about this proximity?... (Derrida 1982: 124)

The centrality of proximity, but also its “critical ambiguity” one could say, to Heidegger's project is thus Derrida's primary target, for:

[t]he proximity to itself of the inquirer authorizes the identity of the inquirer and the interrogated. We who are close to ourselves, we interrogate *ourselves* about the meaning of Being. (126)

It is the illusion of self-presence which allows for the emergence of “self-questioning”, and philosophy, or “critical distance”, in the first place: it is an almost mystical notion of proximity, which is called to guarantee critical distance:

The value of proximity, that is, of presence in general, therefore decides the essential orientation of this analytic of *Dasein*. The motif of proximity surely finds itself caught in an opposition which henceforth will unceasingly regulate Heidegger's discourse. The fifth section of *Sein und Zeit* in effect seems not to contradict but to limit and contain what was already gained, to wit that the *Dasein* “which we are” constitutes the exemplary being for the hermeneutic of the meaning of Being by virtue of its proximity to itself, of our proximity to ourselves, our proximity to the being that we are. At this point Heidegger marks that this proximity is *ontic*. (Derrida 1982: 127)

And hence “[e]verything transpires as if one had to reduce the ontological distance acknowledged in *Sein und Zeit* and to state the proximity of Being to the essence of man” (128).

Derrida challenges the logic of this approximation towards the ontic ground of Being as ontology's or philosophy's fundamental justification or goal as still a profoundly “humanist” venture, since: “[t]he restoration of the essence is also the restoration of a dignity and a proximity: the co-responding dignity of Being and man, the proximity of Being and man” (130):

The ontological distance from *Dasein* to what *Dasein* is as ek-sistence and to the *Da* of *Sein*, the distance that first was given as ontic proximity, must be

reduced by the thinking of the truth of Being. Whence in Heidegger's discourse the dominance of an entire metaphysics of proximity, of simple and immediate presence, a metaphysics associating the proximity of Being with the values of neighboring, shelter, house, service, guard, voice, and listening. (130)

To simplify for the sake of our present argument, right here right now, the "da" of "Dasein" is what gives rise to (ontic) proximity while at the same time it calls for its reappropriation through approximation and thus for a reduction of the "critical distance" that was born out of the forgetting of ontic proximity. This "restricted economy" is characterised by Derrida in one powerful sentence: "Propriety, the co-propriety of Being and man, is proximity as inseparability" (133).

This also explains why Derrida, instead, in "The Ends of Man", but also, in a different context in *The Politics of Friendship*,<sup>3</sup> calls for a thinking that tackles the anthropocentrism (as well as the humanism) of a community based on the idea of co-self-presence as both approximation and appropriation:

What is difficult to think today is an end of man which would not be organized by a dialectics of truth and negativity, an end of man which would not be a teleology in the first person plural. The *we*, which articulates natural and philosophical consciousness with each other in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, assures the proximity to itself of the fixed and central being for which this circular reappropriation is produced. The *we* is the unity of absolute knowledge and anthropology, of God and man, of onto-theo-teleology and humanism. "*Being*" and language – the group of languages – that the *we* governs or opens: such is the name of that which assures the transition between metaphysics and humanism via the *we*. (Derrida 1982: 121)

Thus the argument outlined above here comes full circle: the co-presence of this humanist, metaphysical community, the ideal addressee and subject of any "critique" and thus of a concept like "critical distance", is precisely that which is being challenged today by the proliferation of "tele-technologies", virtualisation and "social" media.

The fundamental spatial as well as ontological ambiguity of proximity – which is as inescapable as metaphysics in general – since there is no choice but to engage with metaphysical notions and the tradition of Western metaphysics of presence and proximity – thus gives rise to a whole system of ambiguations, disambiguations and reambiguations that involve, basically, economies of

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<sup>3</sup> It would be absolutely necessary, even though it is beyond the scope of this essay, to read *The Politics of Friendship* through the critical metaphysics of proximity that is being investigated here. The Heideggerian "*Bei sich*" and "*Mitsein*", and the threat of the loss of propriety/proximity/self-presence, as well as the critique of "fraternization" and "familiarity" are essential aspects of Derrida's understanding and critique of democracy and community (Derrida 2005).

difference (and oppositions), and which are “regulated” by “media” (who, in turn, can be understood as technologies of approximation and distancing).

To illustrate this, let us “close in” on such a metaphor of distance and approximation as it supports both Heidegger’s work and Derrida’s critique. As Rebecca Saunders points out “distance is a central notion both to Heidegger’s depiction of being-in-the-world and to the culture of friendship as elaborated by Derrida” (Saunders 2011: 35), even though, as I mentioned above, the relay between distance and proximity, difference and identity, absence and presence, constitutes the very core and the entirety of Derridean deconstruction. “Arguing for the ontological primacy of a familiarity that is everyday *Dasein*’s fundamental mode of being-in-the-world, Heidegger describes the environment in terms of *proximity*...” (36), as Saunders continues. However, while Saunders’s focus is on the relationality of distance and of the apparent Heideggerian privileging of ontic proximity over the “suppression of foreignness” (39), what I am interested in here is the aporia at work in the very notion of Heideggerian *Ent-fernung*. For Heidegger, modernity and technology are actually defined by this strange logic expressed in the hyphen between *Ent* and *fernung*. It is the erasure of distance by the increased intensity and the “challenging forth” of human “enframing” through technology as means of communication, which provokes the crisis of distance and proximity. As he says in 1950, in a lecture on “Das Ding”: “Today everything present is equally near and far... The absence of distance reigns” (Heidegger 1994: 170).<sup>4</sup> Arguably, this tendency has continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and finds its current endpoint in the alluded to 24/7 connectivity and instantaneity of our global network society, and for which, one could argue everything has been subjected to distancing, via “tele-technology”, while at the same time distance as such has been abolished and ubiquitous proximity is said to reign.

While this diagnosis might certainly be too apocalyptic and too technologically determinist, it nevertheless explains why Heidegger, who might be understood as the “ultimate” Western metaphysician in his very project of *Destruktion*, insists on an essential connection between being and proximity: “*Dasein* has an essential tendency towards proximity” (Heidegger 1993: 105).<sup>5</sup> Nearness, or proximity, for Heidegger however is not simply a question of measurable distance (*Abstand*). Instead he constructs *Ent-fernung* as a transitive noun: “Dis-tancing is first and foremost a circumspect approach, a bringing-near as procurement, disposal, having-to-hand”. *Dasein* is in fact, “essentially dis-tancing, it allows the Being it is to encounter its beingness in proximity” (105). *Dasein* is in fact, “wesenhaft ent-fernend, es läßt als das Seiende, das es ist, je Seiendes in die Nähe begegnen” (105).<sup>6</sup> Distance and proximity are always relational and relative to “me”, or *Dasein*, as Heidegger explains: “Die Nähe ist nur ein Modus der Entfernung” (Heidegger 1979: 309). *Ent-fernen* in the

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<sup>4</sup> “Heute ist alles Anwesende gleich nah und gleich fern... Das Abstandslose herrscht” (all translations unless indicated otherwise are mine).

<sup>5</sup> “Im *Dasein* liegt eine wesenhafte Tendenz auf Nähe”.

<sup>6</sup> “Das Ent-fernen ist zunächst und zumeist umsichtige Näherung, in die Nähe bringen als beschaffen, bereitstellen, zur Hand haben”.

transitive and “active” sense thus means: “Making-disappear distance, approaching as bringing near/teaching”.<sup>7</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to see Heidegger as a mere technophobe, captured in some nostalgic longing for proximity, pure being and presence. The overcoming of distance (through communication, media and technology) is the very essence of *Dasein* itself as he says: “*Dasein* itself is dis-tancing: the constant overcoming of distance as presencing of the existing” (179: 313).<sup>8</sup> And here lies the connection with our “conundrum” of critical proximity: making present (*Vergegenwärtigung*) but also understanding in general is approximation, or bringing into ontological and epistemological closeness, as a form of overcoming (*Überwindung*). However, the abolishment of distance is by no means a guarantee for (more) proximity, on the contrary, since the distinction between far and near is crucial for *Dasein* to experience itself within its environment. Technology, mediality and ontology are therefore inextricably linked but are also a constant “danger” to themselves. *Ent-fernung* guarantees thus both proximity and distance through its aporetic structure. The abolishment of *Ent-fernung*, however, that is so prevalent in contemporary communicational (tele-)technologies (Heidegger refers to this as “madness for proximity [Tollheit auf Nähe]”, 1979: 312), is thus not only a threat to vital critical distance but also a threat to the experience of *Dasein* itself. What then is proximity, we can ask with Heidegger: “if despite of the reduction from its longest to its shortest distance it [proximity] fails to arrive? What is proximity if it is kept away even by the restless elimination of distances? What is proximity, if in its absence distance also stays away?” (1994: 3).<sup>9</sup> The true catastrophe, in fact, would be for the aporia of *Ent-fernung* to break down, which would lead to the disappearance of both, near and far. Would the real “conundrum” of critical distance therefore not lie exactly in the absolute necessity and impossibility of proximity? And would this not be that which underlies the (self)deconstruction of critical distance (which in Heideggerian terms could be named “*kritische Ent-fernung*”)?

Derrida refers to Heidegger’s notion of *Ent-fernung* in *The Post Card* in the context of the “*Fort – Da*” game of “little Hans” and Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in connection with the idea of the “*unheimlich*”, in the sense of “what is closest must be avoided”:<sup>10</sup> “...proximity distances itself in *abyeme* (*Ent-fernung*)” (Derrida 1987: 323). This logic of *Ent-fernung* (dis-tancing, *é-loignement*) understood, on the one hand, as Heidegger’s impossible approximation, and, on the other hand, as the Freudian “*unheimlich*” with its unbearable proximity (and familiarity), is also what is at stake in an interview with Derrida on the notion of “*parages*”:

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<sup>7</sup> “Verschwindenmachen der Ferne, Näherung als Beibringen”.

<sup>8</sup> “Das Dasein selbst ist ent-fernendes: die ständige Überwindung der Ferne als Gegenwärtigung des Vorhandenen”.

<sup>9</sup> “...wenn sie trotz der Verringerung der längsten Strecke auf die kürzesten Abstände ausbleibt? Was ist die Nähe, wenn sie durch das rastlose Beseitigen der Entfernungen sogar abgewehrt wird? Was ist die Nähe, wenn mit ihrem Ausbleiben auch die Ferne wegbleibt?”

<sup>10</sup> Again, a reading of Freud’s uncanny, as necessary as it would undoubtedly be, will have to be deferred, as well as a reengagement with Derrida’s “postal principle” (Derrida 1987, *passim*).

*Les parages* means a vicinity; it is a metaphor that comes to us from nautical or maritime language; it names a vicinity at a distance that is difficult to measure: that which is neither near nor far. There is an attraction there, a kinship, a proximity but without the one reaching the other... (Derrida 1995: 373.)

In *Parages* (Derrida 2011 [1986]), where this passage first appeared in the context of Derrida's reading of Blanchot and the logic of the "step – *pas*", epitomised in Blanchot's *Viens* and *Le Pas au-delà*, as the necessary but impossible step "beyond" (*jenseits, au-delà*), into the unknown, the unknowable future, the absolute distance, as the "limit experience", Derrida asks:

What happens when the near be-comes far, when the near comes from far? (... by the same de-distancing bringing-near of the near and the far. *Entfernung* de-distances the far it constitutes, brings the far near therefore holding the far far. The eventual appropriation [a forced or risky etymology for *Ereignis*] of the far is de-distant from itself). The nearness of the near is not near, therefore is not proper, and you [*tu*] see all the dams bursting announced step by step. (2011: 17)

And, again closing in on our "conundrum", in a passage that now combines the Heideggerian logic of ontic approximation with Blanchot's impossible "step beyond" and the injunction towards the absolutely other to "come", to "come near", with our topic of the impossibility of critical distance, Derrida writes, in echoing the passage cited above from Heidegger's introduction to "Das Ding":

What then is the "near" or the relation near-far? What is the proximity of the near? The thing certainly can be near, but the near or proximity is not near. The proximity of the near is not any other *thing* but the near thing, but it is not near. The essence of the near is not any more near than the essence of the red is of the color red. Let's at least submit to the law of this truth, to this manifestation of the essence *as such* that dominates the most powerful philosophical tradition, up to Heidegger who finds next to it thought's most decisive aid. (25)

In forcing this crucial link between proximity and essence – which would also require a return to Heidegger's essay on technology with its claim that the essence of technology is by no means anything technological (cf. below; Heidegger 1978) – Derrida, finally, reformulates the question of critical distance and proximity:

Consequently, the more one tries to approach the proximity of what approaches, the more the completely other – and therefore the infinitely distant – of proximity withdraws [*se creuse*]. Since as much can be said of the far, no *opposition* is more pertinent between the near and the far, no identity either. Now this contraband or *double-bind* or bivalence affects *all*, all that *is*, that is, all that presents itself, *is present*, comes, comes to pass, arrives, happens, exists, the essence of the event and the event of the

essence, so many indissociable semantic values of a non-regional topics of the near and the far. (Derrida 2011: 25 [translation slightly modified])

Having thus “zoomed in” on the aporetic connection between proximity and distance in Heidegger and Derrida, I propose to take one more step by illustrating the aporia of *Ent-fernung* (and its bearing on the connection between critical distance and critical proximity) at work so to speak in a few important passages in Derrida’s own texts, before briefly returning to the question of technology posed above, with reference to our so-called “posthumanist” times.

One could say that deconstruction, as a “critical” movement and as a process that “befalls” or “inhabits” any metaphysical system, relies on what could be referred to, not so much as critical distance, but critical proximity. It has often been said that Derridean deconstruction is characterized by an ethics of reading that is predicated on ideas like ultra-closeness, implication, invagination, or chiasmic reading. All of these notions are based on metaphors of proximity. This closeness of reading has often been interpreted as special “care” or as uncanny repetition, so much so that speculations about why Derrida rarely speaks of texts that seem somehow to “deconstruct themselves”, or are somehow “too close” to and, therefore, too close for deconstruction, and maybe therefore are interchangeable with, or in no “need” of deconstruction (like Samuel Beckett’s texts to name but one example), usually imply that deconstruction might fail on the side of proximity rather than on the side of critical distance (cf. Derrida 1992: 60).

This appears to be supported by Derrida himself who in *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say...* (2006) is speaking of the aporia – the impossible necessity – of (not) being on Hélène Cixous’ “side”, namely the “side of life”. This does not only involve the inability of Derrida – and with him an entire tradition of thought or philosophy – to “decide” and thus to preserve his critical distance where questions about life and death are concerned. It concerns the very possibility of distinguishing between life and death, and the very possibility of life-death as a “question”. In the context of this challenge – which probably constitutes one of the most important challenges of our (“posthuman(ist)”) time, namely to rethink “our” relationship to life and death – one could reread Derrida’s and Cixous’ “takes” on deconstruction as two versions of a philosophy of “life” that are infinitely close but nevertheless not on the same side, and therefore infinitely and “critically” distant.<sup>11</sup>

In *H.C. For Life: That Is to Say...*, Derrida provides a kind of summary of the curious personal and public intellectual relationship that is both based on absolute proximity and on critical distance, or on the principle and aporia of *Ent-fernung* one could say. This expresses itself in the curious logic of the “side” and “being on someone’s side”. Derrida refers to the impossibility of this radical

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<sup>11</sup> The question of critical distance expresses itself in the whole dynamics of “fraternity”, friendship and proximity (cf. also Derrida 2005) which is at stake in this life-long “friendship” between Derrida and Cixous. Both do not only thematise this dynamics in a great number of their respective texts but also “embody” it so to speak in what could be called a relay system that engages their entire works (cf. Herbrechter 2013b).

absence of distance which Cixous keeps alluding to in her novels, and in particular in this passage from *Beethoven à jamais, ou l'existence de Dieu*:

How quickly she lost her life: it was a shock of terror. Thus one can pass – from one second to the next – to the other side – to the horrible other side – the side without other – the side without other, without (a) me. (Cixous 1993: 210)

Derrida takes this motif of “the other side/the side of the other” as the main motif of his relationship with Cixous’ oeuvre, but at the same time he also uses it to investigate and deconstruct the impossible notion of proximity between their respective “takes” on life and death, and in doing so at least hints at the possibility of an autoimmunity at work in deconstruction itself, namely precisely along the faultline between “life” and “death”. In commenting on the above passage from Cixous, Derrida points out that: “you will note that the worst trial thus described also contained, without the slightest contradiction with this monstrous other side of the side without other and without a me, an experience of the side-by-side, of a pseudo-proximity worse than all the separations, worse than betrayal itself and absolute perjury... (Derrida 2006: 53), or a “[s]ide by side in a proximity as irreparable as an amputation” (Cixous 1993: 214-15).

The monstrous other side – death – is a side without other and thus also without me. In analogy, the abolishment of critical distance would be precisely such a death. Even worse, this ultimate abolishment of distance, as in Heidegger, does not, of course, mean the achievement of proximity, for example in the idea of some kind of “loving death”, or some form of reunification with the “One”: “when one is *on the side of*, one is not close; one has to be on the other side, on the side of the other, in order to be close. When one is on the same side, paradoxically, one is not close, there is no longer any distance or proximity; neither speed nor slowness” (Derrida 2006: 38). Derrida’s whole reading of Cixous revolves around this notion of “side” (*côté*), and of “taking sides”, “side-by-side” etc. I would therefore like to interpret this reinscription of a friendship “in deconstruction” along the lines of “taking” and “not-taking sides” along the lines of what I said about the conundrum of “critical proximity”. In critical distance one proves to one’s self that one is not on the side of the other. However, in engaging with the other as other one needs to be close, as close as possible, namely in what Derrida refers to as the “pseudo-proximity” of the “side-by-side”. Only the abolishment of distance therefore seems to support the “criticality” of critical distance. Thinking and criticism cannot happen “on the same side”, cannot happen without differentiation, difference and *différance*. Absolute proximity is, in fact, deadly.

However, this is not where it stops. Derrida’s reading of Cixous, his reading of the relationship between their work and thought, inevitably turns into a self-analysis of Derridean deconstruction. As Derrida, aware of his approaching death, points out, what he most admires but also finds most puzzling – where he cannot be on Cixous’s side, so to speak – is that in her work the logic of the side of proximity and distance, life and death is in fact suspended:

But we will see confirmation that this side, as the side of life, has the particularity of being the only side. There is no other side than this side, the

side of life. There is only one side in her geography, her geophysics, and her geology... life, whence everything derives and detaches itself and toward which everything comes and comes back. Life has no other, it has no other side; and all the sides, all the asides, all the sidesteppings leave their traces on the same side of the same vein. (Derrida 2006: 39)

Obviously this could be misunderstood as if there were two sides to deconstruction – maybe a Derridean version that thinks through the non-side of death, and a Cixousian version, that is devoted to the affirmation of life. But this would in fact go against the very logic of the critical proximity and distance in the process of deconstruction at work in *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say...* This distinction, this critical difference would in effect re-establish a distance where there is, however, no longer a side-by-side, and certainly not two sides, but maybe only one side without another. This is precisely what this friendly “argument” between Derrida and Cixous is about, in which, like two children they might be using the conditional form to describe a kind of habitual role play:

Between her and me, it is as if it were a question of life and death. Death would be on my side and life on hers. I would attempt to be convinced of life by her, preparing myself to receive grace instead of the coup de grace, but I am and remain for life *convaincu de mort* (both convicted and convinced of death)... She, on her Side [*de son Côté, avec un grand C*], it is [*c'est*] for life she is convinced of life for life... (Derrida 2006: 158)

This tug-of-war, between life and death, we can say at last, is what it is at stake in the aporia of *Ent-fernung*, critical distance and proximity, in thinking, *Dasein*, philosophy... It lies in the particular power of fiction (which is of course not confined to literature) to be on the *Side of Life*, without other side, based as it is on “belief” or “make-believe”, as Derrida concludes:

The thing is, I just cannot believe her, as far as life death is concerned, from one side to the other. I just cannot believe her, that is to say: I can only manage to believe her, I only manage to believe her when she speaks in the subjunctive. (2006: 159)

So it is the subjunctive, arguably, the side-by-side of pseudo-proximity, the temporary suspension of disbelief that makes critical distance possible and lets the conundrum of critical proximity come into view, or as Cixous says:

The other must remain in all its extreme strangeness within the greatest possible proximity. (Cixous, in Sellers 1988: 29)

To conclude, what are the implications of all this for the future of critical distance? As a vital aspect of critique and criticism (whether literary or not) the mechanism (“conundrum” or “*dispositif*”) of critical distance seems a vital and, arguably, an “originary” technology, or proto-tele-technology of the human. As all technologies, critical distance goes back to the originary supplementarity of the human in Derrida’s and also Stiegler’s sense (cf. Stiegler 1998 and Bradley 2011). It is one of those indispensable but also uncontrollable and disappearing



“supplements” that made us human in the first place. However, in the time of new media and new tele-technologies of proximity, which produce new and ever more haunting forms of spectralities, this is far from being a reassuring insight. The knowledge that “we” have never been “human”, at least in the sense that we imagined “ourselves” to be, in our contemporary, newly rediscovered proximity with nonhumans – animals, machines, networks... – will not in the end lend itself to a reaffirmation of the human as such. A return to anthropocentrism through some backdoor, from now on, is blocked, precisely through a new critical distance to ourselves. One can only hope that Heidegger (citing Hölderlin) was right in his final reformulation of the aporia of *Ent-fernung*, namely that, “...where danger is, grows the saving power also” (Heidegger 1978: 316).

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